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# “They’re Bringing Crime:” White Fear and Closing Borders

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# “They’re Bringing Crime:” White Fear and Closing Borders

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## Overview

- This study examines the roots of xenophobia in the specific case of current political discourse regarding immigrants to the United States.
- Research focuses on:
  - Exploring the roots of the increase in preemptive punitive action and threat-based rhetoric following the 2016 presidential election.
  - Non-criminal immigration violator at-large arrests by ICE more than doubled, increasing from 5,498 in 2016 to 13,600 in 2017.
  - ICE book-ins increased from 108,342 in 2016 to 139,530 in 2017.
- Analyzing this increase through proximization theory from the research of Piotr Cap.
  - A model of discourse that locates threats within proximity to both speaker and addressee.
  - Used to create urgency and legitimize actions or policies in order to neutralize an antagonistic entity or justify preventative or protective measures in advance of the aforementioned threat.
  - Applicable to diverse fields: preventative medicine, climate change, immigration, national security.
- Using the Chapman Survey of American Fears.

## Abstract

Leading up to the 2016 election, popular rhetoric surrounding immigrants to the United States took a marked turn. This change can be partially explained using Piotr Cap’s proximization theory, a threat-based discursive model that relies on locating threatening events in proximity to the audience in order to justify preventative or protective measures. Quantitative public opinion data from the Chapman University Survey of American Fears suggests that a disbelief in immigrants’ ability to assimilate is strongly correlated with a fear of immigrants committing crimes. White Americans who hold these beliefs typically tend to favor or strongly favor preemptive punitive action against noncitizen residents, including but not limited to increased policing, raiding homes and businesses, and deportation. The anticipation of elevated criminal activity within the immigrant population is used to motivate both individual and state-level action against immigrants, irrespective of real-world statistics regarding citizen and noncitizen crime rates. Further, a comparison of attitudes toward changing demographics in Europe and America places the American immigrant and refugee situation in a broader global context. Finally, current and historical case studies of nations more and less hostile towards refugees and immigrants attempt to identify the present-day actors that stand to benefit from framing the immigrant as latent criminal and citizen as defender of the nation.

## Hypotheses:

H 1: Americans who see immigrants as isolated from American culture are more likely to fear or strongly fear losing majority status.

H 2: White Americans who fear losing majority status due to changing demographics are more likely to favor or strongly favor state use of force against immigrants.

H 3: Americans who believe that immigrants are more likely to commit crimes than US citizens are more likely to endorse punitive state action against immigrants in advance of any hypothetical criminal activity.

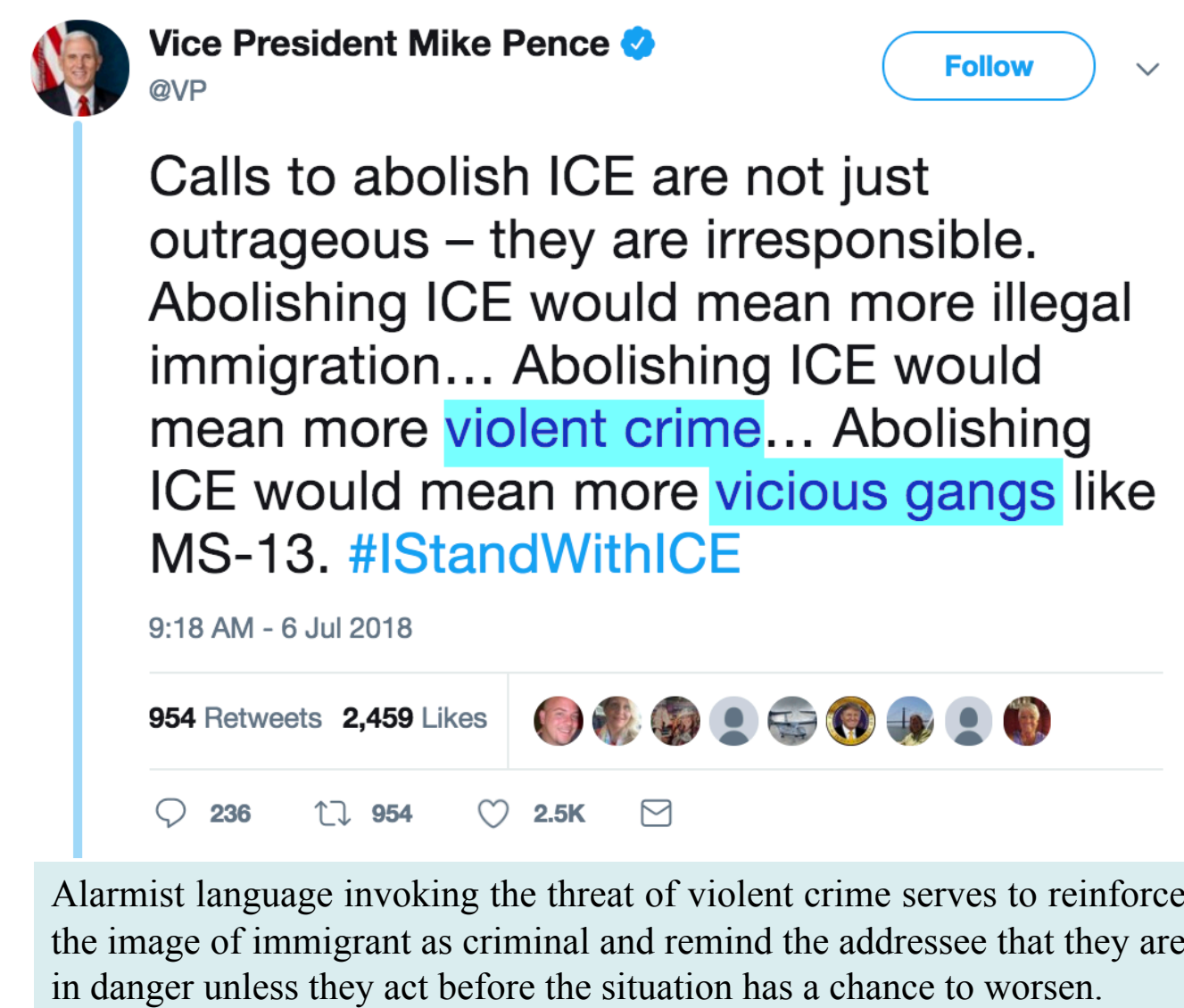
## Data

### H 1: Isolation

Model	Coefficient (B)	Std. Coefficient	Significance
Indicate level of agreement: Recent immigrants are more reluctant to assimilate than previous immigrants.	-0.237	-0.303	0.000
Dependent Variable: How afraid are you of the following events? Whites no longer being a majority in the US.			

The results of this regression test indicate that the relationship between these variables is statistically significant at  $p < 0.000$ . The magnitude of this relationship is represented by -0.303, indicating that on the five-point Likert scales used to take responses regarding level of agreement and level of fear respectively, fear tended to increase as agreement with the idea that recent immigrants are resistant to assimilation increased.

The negative value of the standardized coefficient can be explained by the way the independent variable was coded for the purposes of statistical analysis; since agreement was based on qualitative levels rather than on a quantitative amount of agreement, strong disagreement was interpreted as a higher numerical value and strong agreement as a lower one. Reversing this yields the absolute value of the negative standardized coefficient above. This means that for every unit step indicating greater fear, there was a step of 0.303 units towards skepticism for the ability of immigrants to assimilate. This can be interpreted in the opposite direction as well; fear of recent immigrants increases the more the respondent believes that immigrants are unable or unwilling to assimilate.



### H 3: Fear of crime

Model	Coefficient (B)	Std. Coefficient	Significance
Indicate level of agreement: Immigrants are more likely to commit crime than US citizens.	-0.613	-0.622	0.000
Dependent Variable: completePunitive			

The results of this regression test again show that the relationship between these variables is statistically significant at  $p < 0.000$ . The magnitude of this relationship is represented by -0.622, indicating that a much higher change in completePunitive is predicted by the fear of immigrants committing crimes than by the fear of loss of majority status. As in H1, the negative coefficient value is a result of the way level-of-agreement questions are coded rather than an indication that an inverse relationship is present.

This ties in the most closely with proximization theory as it pertains to perceived threats to the nation. Directly above, a social media post by the vice president in regard to immigration enforcement that perfectly displays proximization theory. The speaker generates urgency and fear by presenting their solution as immediately necessary to neutralize an imminent threat, in this case an increase in gang-related violent crime.



### H 2: Changing Demographics

Model	Coefficient (B)	Std. Coefficient	Significance
How afraid are you of the following event: Whites no longer being the majority in the US.	0.366	0.331	0.000
Dependent Variable: completePunitive			

A note on the dependent variable used above: completePunitive is the result of recoding two level-of-agreement variables into binary variables and adding them together. First, the questions “Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements: Police should be allowed to raid businesses and homes in order to find undocumented workers” and “Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements: Deportation is a good solution for immigration issues” were selected in order to model overall desire for punitive state action against immigrants. These variables were then recoded so that an answer of “agree” or “strongly agree” with either was processed as a value of 1, and all negative or neutral responses were coded as 0. Lastly, these variables were added together to produce a value between 0 and 2. A value of two indicates that the respondent agreed or strongly agreed with both statements, while a value of one indicates that the respondent agreed or strongly agreed with one but not both.

The results of this regression are similar in magnitude and significance to the results displayed at left by H1. It should be noted that although a direct correlation and a positive slope was observed despite a negative coefficient in H1, the positive coefficient in H2 still represents a direct correlation and a positive slope; this is a result of the way “Indicate level of agreement” questions are coded in the Chapman Survey of American Fears.



## Findings

### H 1: Isolation

- When immigrants are read as ‘other’ (by framing all immigrants or certain groups of immigrants as either unable or unwilling to assimilate), there is a significant amount of resistance to their presence and an associated fear of loss of majority status on the part of citizens. However, it is not as pronounced a predictor as fear of demographic change itself or fear of crime. This suggests that fear-based framings are perhaps more accurate when attempting to analyze the root causes of xenophobia.

### H 2: Changing demographics

- Those who fear losing their majority status to changing demographics fall back on the distance or proximity between themselves and the immigrant-as-other; the distance, ideologically, between their concept of themselves as citizen-defender and immigrant as criminal, serves to increase their fear of the immigrant’s physical or temporal proximity to them. As a result, they defend themselves by going on the attack in the form of preemptive punitive state action.

### H 3: Fear of crime

- This hypothesis holds the most closely to Cap’s theory of proximization, and is the most clearly present when critically examining the current rhetoric surrounding the issue of illegal immigration. Likewise, fear of immigrants committing crimes is the greatest predictor of the desire for punitive state action against immigrants, even when controlling for potential confounding variables such as age, race, and education level. Proximization makes use of the threat of violent crime in order to stoke nationalism and tighten border security, even when crime rates fail to match this narrative.

## Conclusions

- By positioning any given immigrant as a latent criminal, it is possible to reframe the issue of immigrants as a matter of public and individual safety. Further, by locating the threat of changing demographics within temporal proximity to the addressee, the addressee becomes more receptive to the idea that preemptive punitive action must be taken against a group that has already been established as a potential threat...
  - ...resulting in the addressee being more strongly in favor of state use of force against groups that threaten majority status.

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